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Senator Edith Prague  
Representative Joseph Serra

Co-Chairs Joint Committee on Aging  
Connecticut Legislative Assembly  
State House Room 011  
Hartford, Ct 06106

Dear Senator Prague, Representative Serra and the Committee Members on Aging

I wanted to take a brief moment to share with you regarding House Bill 6453 – An Act Concerning Grandparent's Visitation Rights.

Thank you for the time you allowed me in my brief testimony in the hearing today. I believe that House Bill 6453 could become an important tool to assist hundreds of grandparents in the state of Connecticut in their efforts to maintain a supportive presence in the lives of their grandchildren that absent such legislation they currently will not be able to sustain.

As I shared in my testimony, on behalf of the Senate Democratic Office I have conducted listening sessions and meetings with over 500 religious leaders and spoken with hundreds of their congregants all across the state of Connecticut. In the process of those interactions and conversations I have encountered dozens of grandparents who have been denied access to visitation and on-going contact with their grandchildren. Those conversations have been mirrored in my 37 years experience as a Pastor and in my several years as a Therapeutic Foster Parent when I lived and practiced ministry in Massachusetts.

The family situations have varied from case to case, but in a vast majority of the cases brought to my attention they have included death, divorce, separation, unmarried parents, incarceration and desertion. In many of those situations the grandparent was called to provide much needed strong and continuous grandparental relationship with the child, often in lieu of an actual parental relationship between the child and their biological parent.

At a subsequent time, one of the biological parents has decided to remove the child from the grandparent's care and then proceeded to sever the relationship between grandparent

and child, often at a very high emotional cost to the child and grandparent involved. Many of these removals are in retaliation for the grandparent's assessment that the parent is unwilling or unable to provide the child reasonable parental care as well as a supportive and loving environment.

As a pastor I experienced one such retaliation incident that occurred in the life of one of my parishioners. The mother had an extreme history of a bi-polar disorder with the possibility of borderline personality disorder and was often under the care of related mental health professionals. The husband was separated from the mother and absent from the home. The two children often arrived at school with clothing that reeked of cat urine, not having been bathed for days at a time and insufficient resources for lunch but they did not qualify for free meals due to the income levels that the mother earned as well as the documented contributions of child support provided by the estranged husband.

The grandmother became concerned. She had a long-term care-giving relationship with the children, taking place over several years, as the children were dropped off by the school bus daily at her home and she provided care for them until the mother arrived after work. She consulted with myself, school officials and the children's pediatrician. We all encouraged her to report the situation to DCF and to ask them to initiate an investigation into possible neglect. That first investigation was closed by DCF. Immediately following the investigation the children were forbidden to have any contact with the grandmother.

A few months later I was contacted by the school authorities who had many of the same concerns previously raised by the grandmother, but now they had escalated to a heightened level due to the absence of the grandmother's presence in taking care of the children in the afternoons and weekends.

After consultation amongst ourselves, the two children's teachers, the school nurse and an adjustment counselor and I initiated a meeting with the pediatrician, the grandmother and a staff member familiar with the children from the Parents Resource Center. We all simultaneously submitted separate reports to DCF.

This second investigation was also closed and the mother removed the children from the school system, relocated to another town, forbid the children to have any contact with the grandmother, the former husband's family and with any members of the church. She effectively isolated the children from all their previous systems of emotional support. DCF explained that the current law and the interpretation of Roth vs Weston (Supreme Court 2002) had tied their hands.

What I hear from grandparents in situations like the above asking for is a tool here in Connecticut to assist them in providing an emotional and family safety net around their precious grandchildren. There is incredible frustration that the current system allows such emotional isolation and abuse to take place with no legal recourse on the part of the grandparent who must stand idly by and to be unable to even have any semblance of normal contact with their grandchildren.

I am not an expert in Constitution Law. I do not pretend to know the ins and outs of how to remedy these incredibly complex and difficult situations. I do know this... that as a society that we must find a remedy so that grandparents have a rightful place at the table so that the welfare of vulnerable children can be protected.

We can not as a society stand idly by and let these vulnerable children lose what to many is their sole long-term steady provider of love, care and resources so that they may grow up to become loving and caring people who contribute to society. Failing to do so, to stand idly by and let this injustice take place simply assures that the negative cycle of abuse and neglect will pass on to the next generation.

I do urge the Committee to be in contact with other stakeholders in this discussion, to look at the best practices of other states and to craft legislation that will move us out of the current situation where Connecticut's most vulnerable children are denied access to the people and resources who could, if allowed help them live surrounded by the network of love and care that they so much deserve. I understand that other states have been able to craft such legislation that has survived Court scrutiny. The children of Connecticut (and the grandparents who love them) deserve the same rights.

Thanks for your time and God Bless you all in what you are doing in your work.

David

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**"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead**